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Decade of Progress, Legacy of Hope

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This is a year for major birthdays--the seventy-fifth for the Forest Service, forty-fifth for the Soil Conservation Service, NEPA's tenth, and the first for USDA's new Office of Environmental Quality. I hope we can have many more birthday celebrations this year, and that they are all as successful as this one.

The signing of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) on New Year's Day in 1970 ushered in the "Decade of the Environment." We have heard today from some of the prime movers who made that prediction come true.

In the 1970s we worked together to develop and implement a comprehensive and workable environmental policy for the nation.

We put in place strict but enforceable laws to minimize air and water pollution and protect human health.

We established the first federal environmental standards for surface mining and reclamation.

We provided for the protection of plant and animal species threatened with extinction.

We reaffirmed our concern for the global environment.

We acted to preserve our nation's natural heritage.

And we brought about significant new laws to control the use of pesticides and other toxic substances.

We are here, not to mourn the passing of the "Environmental Seventies" that began with NEPA, but rather to celebrate the beginning of the "Action Eighties." The decade just ended left us a legacy for future action.

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Remarks by M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, before the National Environmental Policy Act 10th Anniversary Celebration, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., January 17, 1980.

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NEPA is still "on the books," and growing stronger with each court opinion. We have only begun to address it fully and to build from its example. It is a law which declared a sweeping environmental policy where none existed before, which required that the federal government predict and consider the environmental consequences of its actions, and which established an environmental policy coordinating body in the Executive Office of the President.

NEPA--generally regarded as the single most important piece of federal environmental legislation ever enacted--was quickly copied by many states, in a tide of "little NEPAs."

It became the cutting edge of a citizen-sponsored environmental reform movement that gave it support, momentum, and impact.

To the general statement of environmental policy which NEPA provided, Congress has added significant legislation that addresses more specifically the broad array of environmental problems afflicting us. From toxic substances to surface mining, to water development, to endangered species, to National Forest land management planning, we have legislatively fleshed-out an environmental policy for the nation.

The burden of environmental improvement now has been passed from the policymakers to the platoons of scientists and land managers who must put these laws into practice. We resolve to implement these laws and make them fully effective in the 1980s.

Effective implementation is not an easy task. But what is particularly notable about the National Environmental Policy Act is that, after ten years of implementation, the creative and innovative intentions of policymakers have not been diluted or deferred in the transition from policy to practice. The new environmental policy which NEPA established has infiltrated the most remote recesses of the federal agencies, and now influences many of the decisions we make.

NEPA will have a lasting impact upon our way of doing business in the Department of Agriculture.



For one thing, the environmental impact review process has been woven into the fabric of our programs. As in any bold departure from previous direction, NEPA has been both praised and damned. But after some initial resistance, USDA agencies have accepted responsibility for full NEPA implementation, recognizing that it simply represents a good planning process. The Forest Service and Soil Conservation Service have made the environmental impact review procedure their primary mode of decisionmaking, thereby ensuring that the environmental consequences of all decisions are well-considered.

Second, implementation of the Act has brought the public into our decisionmaking processes and given America's citizens and their groups more influence over the final decisions. Citizens become involved directly, with agency planners, and also indirectly, through NEPA-based litigation. How many environmentally questionable proposals have been rejected or modified within the agencies, because of anticipated public objections and the possibility of litigation? Many, I'm sure.

But we also have worked directly to forestall the necessity of litigation by removing any shreds of administrative procedure that shelter our decisionmaking, and by helping everyone who is affected by the results of our decisions become part of the decisionmaking process.

In our RARE II study, for example, we did our best to make the process one which the public could understand, participate in, and influence. We involved the public from the beginning and throughout the study, and received more than a quarter-million public responses to the draft environmental statement.

In our long-term planning programs under the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act and Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act, the public is helping us determine future conservation programs for at least eight USDA agencies. Through RCA, we held over 9,000 public meetings and considered thousands of public concerns and suggestions, leading to draft documents that will be issued next month for another round of public scrutiny. Public involvement will continue to have a positive effect upon our programs.



Third, the knowledge and expertise of the public on environmental issues has increased. Environmental education programs are having an effect, and conservation groups have increased the expertise they bring to bear on our decisions. They have built a commendable record of competence in assessing the environmental impacts of the alternatives we offer, and in helping us choose the best course.

Last year, when we developed National Forest land management planning regulations to implement Section 6 of the National Forest Management Act, members of the public worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the scientists and Forest Service staff who developed the regulations. This public involvement was helpful, and influenced the content of the final regulations.

Fourth, the NEPA process has forced USDA agencies to consider broader decision criteria, to assess the impacts of their actions on the total human environment, and to consider many options to the most obvious course of action. Some of these criteria, assessments, and additional options are the result of public comment. Others emerge in the interagency review process.

The bottom line--the sum of these impacts of NEPA on the way we do business--is that we are making better decisions because of this law: decisions which weigh a broader range of options--which consider the environmental consequences as well as other implications--and which are more acceptable to the American people. NEPA has created a positive momentum for environmental consideration which has been felt in all aspects of USDA programs.

In the midst of reorganizing the agencies within USDA, for example, we have added a new one--the Office of Environmental Quality--to underline our commitment to a quality environment. This office will serve as a focal point for the many environmental matters within USDA.

Let me list some specific manifestations of the changes in USDA which NEPA has fostered:

The new National Forest land management planning regulations are, in effect, the NEPA interdisciplinary analysis process applied to public land management.



We have rewritten the standards and specifications for many Soil Conservation Service rangeland conservation practices to expand and emphasize guidance for environmental concerns, and to broaden our helpfulness as well as our view of rangeland values.

The Soil Conservation Service has worked with the Fish and Wildlife Service to develop "Channel Modification Guidelines" so that we protect the environment while helping streams improve their productivity.

We and other federal agencies are cooperating with Mexico to address the problem of desertification in the arid and semi-arid lands of the West.

We have issued interim policies and procedures calling for consideration of nonstructural measures, as well as structural alternatives, for floodplain protection.

And we have sped the development and use of integrated pest management practices, so as to adequately protect the forests and croplands of the nation against significant pests, with the least hazard to human health and the natural environment.

NEPA is remarkable in that it requires specific consideration of alternative futures. It incorporates a systematic and interdisciplinary approach to planning, to show the relationship between local short-term uses of man's environment and the maintenance and enhancement of long-term resource productivity.

This is an aspect of NEPA needing more emphasis--the consideration of alternative futures. The most desirable future may not always be a continuation of the status quo.

NEPA represents a challenge yet to be met. Can our environmental planning be both imaginative and flexible enough to meet the unexpected? It can, and it must be.

During the decade since NEPA became law, environmental considerations have come to shape policy and action in ways and to a degree we little expected or knew before. We are now at the threshold of a new and exciting decade. Problems of optimum land use, environmentally sensible energy use and development, and resource conservation confront us. Their solution will not come easily, or without prolonged and intensive public discussion. We will repeatedly be brought face-to-face with fundamental questions about the ability of our society to satisfy our growing demands for goods while protecting the productive capacity and beauty of the land.

At the dawning of the "Action Eighties," we are ready for a new era of environmental protection--an era which reflects maturity of commitment...an era which integrates knowledge with that commitment, and gives the environmental protection effort the sophistication, lasting relevance, and creative energies needed for the perilous years ahead.

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